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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the beliefs about second language learning among nine students of English as a Second Language (all female), and their teacher at Queen Arwa University (Yemen). The survey instrument consisted of five demographic statements and 47 statements concerning language learning in a Likert-type scaled response format. Results indicate students and teacher generally agreed that: repetition/practice and time on task are critical to language learning; it is easier for children than adults to learn second languages; they (as individuals) have language aptitude; second languages are learned best in the target foreign country; some languages are easier to learn than others; and they would like to know native speakers better. Strongest disagreement was with statements that: those good at math and science are not good at languages; a speaker should not use the foreign language until proficient; and listening requires knowing all the words. A significant differences between student and teacher responses was found to the statement that it is easier to read and write in English than to speak and understand it. Statistically non- significant differences were found with statements about error correction, future use of English, and goals in studying English. Implications for instruction are discussed. Contains 18 references. (MSE)

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BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING HELD BY STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHER (A PILOT STUDY)

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Abstract

This paper investigates the beliefs about language learning held by students and their teacher of English from one class at Queen Arwa University (Sana'a, Yemen). Based in part upon the research design and instrument of Elaine Horwitz (University of Texas-Austin), this paper compares the results from students with those of their teacher. This research identifies the most strongly rated beliefs. Findings of this study provide preliminary evidence that, in the case of this sample, students and their teacher of English hold many similar beliefs about language learning. One statement yielded significantly different responses between students and their teacher.

BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING HELD BY STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHER (A PILOT STUDY)

This pilot study examines beliefs about language learning held by adults of English in Yemen. It identifies certain priorities in their beliefs, describes effects that such beliefs may have on language learning, and suggests beliefs that promote language proficiency. The study surveyed on one teacher and her students at Queen Arwa University. The *Kuntz-Rifkin Instrument* (KRI) utilized in the survey is expanded from the *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (Horwitz, 1988). The research questions were:

1. What are the strongly rated statements about language learning for students and their teacher of English?
2. Are there significant differences in statement responses of students and their teacher of English?

Beliefs and Language Acquisition

"Beliefs" are defined in this study as notions about language learning that students have acquired. Since the learning of students and teachers is filtered through their own subjectivity, their socialization, and their education in their first language, understanding beliefs about language learning may increase the efficiency of the acquisition process.

Research on beliefs about language learning held by students and their teachers is limited. In the past, foreign language researchers in the United States (Fox, 1993; Horwitz, 1985; Kern, 1995) identified beliefs about language learning held by students and teachers of commonly taught languages, such as French or

English as a second language. Two researchers (Belnap, 1993, 1987; Kuntz, 1997a) have studied beliefs held by students and teachers of Arabic. Their results suggest that differences do occur between students and teachers and that such assumed beliefs may be erroneous or even detrimental to learning.

Queen Arwa University

A precursor to Queen Arwa University (QAU) was the Yemen International Language Institute in 1989 founded by Waheeba Galib Fare'e and her family. Through her administration of this language institute and her appointment at the University of Sana'a in the College of Education, Fare'e became convinced that a separate institution for women was needed in Yemen. As a professor of education, Fare'e understood the need for Yemeni women to have an institute for higher learning where they could focus on their studies without distractions. This idea of a women's university materialized in the September 1996. English (as a foreign language) is one of the first disciplines to be offered at various levels of instruction. At the QAU, instructors teach classes comprising 10 to 25 students. Students meet five days per week for an hour or the equivalent time per week.

Method

The KRI survey was designed to identify beliefs. It comprised five demographic statements in addition to 47

statements designed in a Likert 5-scale, closed-ended format. This scale measured the strength of student agreement with each statement. For purposes of data analysis, a student choice was equated to numbers as follows:

(a) strongly agree	=	1
(b) agree	=	2
(c) neutral (neither agree nor disagree)	=	3
(d) disagree	=	4
(e) strongly disagree	=	5

The sample comprised an advanced English class and their teacher (Table 1). In the case of this study, the Yemeni teacher of English held advanced degrees in English education from the University of Illinois where she had contact with language educators, such as Alice Omaggio Hadley, Sandra Savignon, and Elaine Horwitz. She also taught English at the Yemen International Language Institute and the University of Sana'a. In December, 1996, the instructor distributed the survey to students to be completed at home.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics for Students and Teacher

Sample size	Students N=9	Teacher N=1
C. Sex (males)	0%	0%
Sex (females)	100%	100%
D. Age (18-22 years)	88%	0%
Age (26+ years)	0%	100%
E. Previous study of ENGLISH	78%	NA
F. Previous study of any language	56%	100%
G. Mother tongue Arabic	88%	100%

Statistical analyses comprised descriptive analyses (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) to match the procedures done by other researchers (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995;

Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995; Tumposky, 1991; Yang, 1992). Since this sample size was small, the author planned non-parametric statistics (Kruskal-Wallis) to test the hypothesis that the students and their teacher would differ in their responses. The decision point was an $\alpha = 0.10$.

Results

Results from the students and teacher reveal some differences.

1. *What are the strongly rated statements about language learning for students and their teacher of English?*

Among this sample, more than 50% of the students reported either AGREEMENT (i.e., strongly agree and agree) or DISAGREEMENT (i.e., strongly disagree and disagree) with 15 statements (Table 2).

Table 2 Responses for Statements from Students and Teacher

Sample size	Students N=9	Teacher N=1
AGREEMENT		
17-Important to repeat & practice	100%	x
1-Child learn FL better than adults	89%	x
11-Better to learn FL in country of FL	78%	x
2-Some people born with special FL ability	78%	x
7-Speak with an excellent accent	78%	x
15-I have a FL aptitude	75%	x
30-My country's people think FL is important	75%	x
3-Some FL easier to learn than other	67%	x
31-Learning FL to know FL speakers	63%	x
39-FL will be helpful professionally	63%	x
***		
6-Will learn this FL very well	89%	
27-If speak FL well, will get good job	86%	
34-Everyone can learn a FL	86%	
12-If heard language, would speak it	75%	
#23-Knowing FL will bring job opportunities	75%	

40-Interested in culture of people	75%	
#43-FL necessary for fellowship	57%	
===		
8-Knowledge of FL culture necessary		x
10-It easier to learn FL2 if learned FL		x
13-Guessing is OK		x
#19-Mistakes are hard to rid later		x
22-Women better FL learners than men		x
25-Learning FL differs from other subjects		x
32-People who speak FL are intelligent		x
*47-Most important proficiency goal		x
	Students	Teacher
Sample size	N=9	N=1
DISAGREEMENT		
29-People good in math/science not in FL	88%	x
38-Distant ancestors knew this FL	63%	x
9-Do not speak until correct	67%	x
35-To read in FL, must know all words	57%	x
36-To listen in FL, must know all words	57%	x
***		
#*47-Most important proficiency goal	83%	
#19-Mistakes are hard to rid later	63%	
28-Read/write easier than speak/understand	63%	
===		
5-FL structured in same way as English		x
16-Learning a FL is learning vocabulary		x
18-Feel self-conscious speaking FL		x
20-Learning FL is learning grammar		x
#23-Knowing FL will bring job opportunities		x
26-Learning FL is translating from Arabic		x
34-Everyone can learn a FL		x
#43-FL necessary for fellowship		x
44-Friends and relatives speak the FL		x
45-The quality of instruction is excellent		x
46-Plan to travel to country of FL		x

* 47 = specific answers # 19 23 43 47 = opposite responses

2. *Are there significant differences in statement responses of students and their teacher of English?*

Results show that few if any significant differences between these students and their teacher (Table 3). A comparison of responses reveal a significant difference for only one statement.

Table 3 Significant Statements for QAU (Kruskal-Wallis)

Sample Size	Students N=9	Teacher N=1
		AGREE
28. Easier to read/write than to speak/understand	5.50	1.00

$p < 0.1$

Although four statements (Table 1: 19, 23, 43, 47) elicited strong responses from students which were opposite from the strong responses of their teacher, none of these differences were found to be significant.

Discussion

This section addresses important statements to which the students and teacher responded strongly and the significant differences between the responses from students and teachers followed by pedagogical suggestions.

Agreement. In terms of strong agreement, responses from students and teacher showed agreement with 10 statements (Table 2). These respondents, like other adult language students and teachers (Fox, 1993; Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1996; Tumposky, 1991; Yang 1992)) reported strongest agreement with (17) "It is important to repeat and practice a lot." Both students and their teacher seem to recognize that "time on task" is critical for learning. In fact, some students may become uncomfortable if their teacher does not create a variety of drills for in-class practice.

These adults' responses to (1) "It is easier for children than adults to learn a FL" are in line with findings revealed in other studies (e.g., Kern). The results of current research on language acquisition such as brain development and lateralization are fairly common knowledge. Even if these results are not fully understood or identified by name, the respondents in this study may have had some contact with this notion.

However, research does seem to show that adult students may learn a foreign language well. Although adults may not attain a native-like pronunciation, they have greater abilities than do children to understand and apply linguistic and cultural rules (Krashen et al., 1982).

To this end, having a foreign language aptitude (15) "I have a FL aptitude" may or may not enhance language learning if the motivation is not positive. Although both the teacher and her students reported strong responses, the teacher's response may reflect her broader interpretation of language aptitude versus the concept that her students may hold.

The QAU respondents also reported agreement with (11) "It is better to learn a FL in the foreign country." Likewise, in previous studies, adult language learners (e.g., Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995; Yang, 1992) agreed with this statement. Recent research concerning study-abroad programs yielded mixed results concerning the best location for effective language acquisition. This belief apparently exists despite evidence from research (Freed, 1995; Brecht et al., 1993) of overseas study programs

that in-country study is not better than local study or even necessarily beneficial at all.

In this study, students and their teacher showed agreement with (3) "Some FLs are easier to learn than others" as do adults in other studies (e.g., Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1997a). Research concerning different lengths of acquisition time needed for different groups of languages corroborates this finding.

Respondents indicated agreement with (31) "I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better." This response may derive from these adults envisioning needs to communicate in international settings for research or employment purposes.

Disagreement. Responses from these adults showed disagreement for five statements (Table 2). The statement yielding the strongest disagreement was (29) "People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages." This response may be a consequence of society's stress on both areas and the perceived use of different learning strategies for math/science and for languages.

These adults concur on disagreement with (9) "You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly." This disagreement suggests the importance on risk-taking and cultivating their creativity to circumlocute meaning. When both teachers and students disagree with this statement, as is the case for this sample, students may feel safe in exploring

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the colloquialisms of the language and its cultural underpinnings.

Finally, the responses from these adults do not appear to indicate a frustration in not knowing all vocabulary--(36) "In order to listen to something in a FL, one must know all the words." Recently, teachers have developed strategies to help students learn how to listen for different purposes. Often these strategies do not require students to memorize lists of vocabulary or to depend on dictionaries or glosses.

This pilot study showed common responses for statements 15 (32% of survey). These statements may be the ones that educators of English could address as common beliefs.

"Significantly" different statements. Several differences require discussion (Table 3). Unlike respondents in other studies (e.g., Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1997a), these respondents showed a significant difference in their reaction to (28) "It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it." Students in Yemen most likely listen to television and radio broadcasts in English. Many middle-class families in Sana'a own satellite dishes to receive stations from the United States and the United Kingdom. Because televised programs in English may be more pleasurable and accessible than written texts, students may think that these auditory skills are easier to acquire. For instance, few bookstores or institutions provide a large selection of books in English. Furthermore, the

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British Council and the U.S. Information Agency requires a membership fee from patrons to borrow books from their libraries.

Although responses to four other statements were not significantly different, they did reveal opposite views between students and their teacher. Students, unlike their teacher, indicated stronger disagreement for a statement concerning immediate error correction--(19) "If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on." Typically, in behaviorist theory, students are not allowed to make errors. Audio-lingual theorists claim that if a student speaks incorrectly, the error may become ingrained in all the students' memories (i.e., fossilized) and production can never be corrected. Perhaps these students seek more tolerance concerning errors in an effort to concentrate on communication and language spontaneity.

Students, in contrast to their teacher, appear to be optimistic about their future use of English. They exhibited strong agreement with (23) "If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it." This response may indicate that a greater sense of world interdependency requires exposure if not proficiency in several languages. As environmental conditions, business, health issues, and politics cross country borders, knowledge of several languages becomes increasingly more important.

As seen in this sample, students enroll in English based upon a fellowship requirements as elicited by (43) "I am studying

this language to qualify for a fellowship or some kind of funding for my education." However, as the cost of education increases and more students compete for government funding, fewer students will be utilizing this funding option.

With regard to (47) "My most important goal in studying this language is to develop the ability to...," students expressed different goals from their teacher. These students sought to "function as a native speaker and provide simultaneous interpreting." In contrast, their teacher thought that students at this level could "participate in short, simple conversations of an informal nature." The differences in these responses may reflect the respondents' interpretation of the statement. Since these students were not beginning learners, they may have higher expectations than their teacher.

Implications

Knowledge of the strength of these student and teacher beliefs is crucial for teachers (Tedick & Walker, 1994), for textbook writers, and for curriculum developers if they are to meet students' goals and expectations of language study. In response to findings in this pilot study concerning beliefs about language, employment, and culture, teachers might try to develop student knowledge by using varied learning strategies that include both non-verbal and verbal communication (Crookall & Oxford, 1990). This research may suggest that students do know

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when they are learning and even may be able to articulate when specific strategies work well.

Current language acquisition research corroborates most of these findings. By collaborating with scholars and publishers concerning curriculum and instructional strategies that address these statements, instructors of English may reduce the amount of time necessary to create some lessons, develop programs, and train teachers. Although these common beliefs could be addressed at pre-employment workshops or during methodology courses at universities and language institutions in Yemen, few of the English-language institutions in Sana'a offer methodology courses for new instructors (Kuntz, 1997b). Moreover, instructors may consider designing action research with their counterparts in English to test variations in materials or learning strategies with students.

Limitations

Several limitations in this study need mentioning. First, the sample was small. Second, the students were not beginning students. In the future, the administrators of English programs might design studies to compare responses from matched classes at subsequent levels of instruction in order to learn more specifically the expectations of both teacher and students. A cohort study would be appropriate to determine the change of beliefs made by teachers and students over the course of the program. In addition, a survey of administrators would enable

scholars to ascertain if there are mismatches in beliefs among educators, teachers, and their respective students.

Conclusions

With this class sample of students of English, this study demonstrates that differences do exist in beliefs between students and their teacher. Both teacher and students must identify, organize, and exploit the positive beliefs held by students about learning a language. Such knowledge may help to determine or modify course content, lesson sequence, teaching methods and materials, and even articulation across levels of instruction. In addition, this knowledge of student beliefs makes it possible for teachers to create a mode of instruction in which students' needs and goals are satisfied. English acquisition may now be understood in terms of the beliefs that students have for their lessons, their control over the curriculum, and their sense of progress within their class. With a joint effort, students, teachers/authors, and administrators of English language institutions around the world can improve teaching effectiveness so that students of English can attain an advanced level of understanding and proficiency.

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